

National group's leader is San Diego attorney

Julia Yoo named president of police watchdog project



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BY TERI FIGUEROA

SAN DIEGO

Julia Yoo landed a plum gig at a pretty busy time.

The San Diego civil rights attorney was just tapped to lead a national organization of attorneys who focus on stopping and preventing abuse of authority.

Yoo was sworn in last month as the president of the National Accountability in Policing Project, whose mission is to protect rights of people during encounters with law enforcement officers and jail staffers.

“Our very purpose is to bring equity and justice to our communities, particularly our communities of color,” Yoo said last month.

She steps in as protests decrying racial injustice and calling for police reform continue to sweep across the nation.

“It’s a remarkable moment,” Yoo said. “I have never seen in 22 years of my practice this kind of prolonged advocacy, prolonged demand for justice. ... It is remarkable.”

Yoo was in line to lead the organization — she was first asked about taking the job two years ago — long before the protests swelled.

“It is an exciting moment and we want to capture it,” she said. “Failure is not an option. We are going to have reform. What are we going to say — ‘We tried, but oh well?’”

Originally from South Korea, Yoo is the first woman and the first person of color to head up the nonprofit, volunteer organization. The group has about 600 attorney members and an additional 115,000 member-supporters, she said.

Rachel Pickens, the executive director of the National Police Accountability Project, pointed to those firsts, saying they will be help Yoo bring “critical insight and awareness as NPAP continues to fight for these and other identities that experience disproportionate harm at the hands of police.”

The National Police Accountability Project doesn’t take on individual clients. Rather, it offers assistance to attorneys, focuses on policy and issues, and talks with leaders and legislators about policing reform.

The organization played a role in the push behind a recent California bill that sought to decertify officers fired for misconduct or convicted of certain crimes. The ideas was to prevent them from getting a law enforcement job somewhere else in the state.

The bill, SB 731, withered at the end of the legislative period. Its failure to pass “was a gut punch,” Yoo said. She plans to push for its return.

In her own practice with attorney Eugene Iredale, Yoo has taken on cases suing law enforcement agencies in the region. Some of her work is done pro bono.

She wants to provide a megaphone for the voiceless, and her clients in civil rights cases have included inmates — including women raped in prison — and families of people who died behind bars.

“My heart really is with the rights of people in custody,” she said of people in prison and jail. As an attorney, Yoo has handled in several high-profile cases, including representing a man who was shot with a Taser during an 2005 encounter with a Coronado police officer. The case, Bryon v. MacPherson, made its way to the the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which ruled that use of the device can be considered excessive use of force — a precedent-setting finding.

In 2011, Yoo also represented Daniel Chong, a UC San Diego student forgotten by DEA agents who left him in a room for five days with no food or water in 2012.

Back when Yoo was a law student, she wasn't looking to become a civil rights attorney. She was thinking of becoming a community organizer.

Then came volunteer work at a women's prison, where she saw inmates who had nothing making sacrifices for each other, even giving up a coveted spot to meet with a pro bono attorney. The experience there, she said, “changed my life.”

“Everything I learned about being a decent human being,” she said, “I learned from my parents and the women at the Denver women's prison.”

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